

Low in fat and high in protein and calcium, canned carp could be an alternative crop for freshwater fish farmers. (K7535-2)

Pity the poor carp. Much maligned as an indiscriminate gobbler of pond trash, his enormous but bony build draws only disdain from the angler who'd dance for joy over landing a trout half its size.

Yet carp is a big seller in Europe and Asia—and a hit in ethnic markets in the United States. Food technologist Donald W. Freeman aims to clue in U.S. consumers with a canned carp product that promises extra profits for fish farmers, too.

"Early market studies indicate that a particular Chinese carp called the bighead carp is readily accepted for its taste, but it's too bony to eat fresh," says Freeman, who is in

the ARS Aquaculture Systems Research Unit at Pine Bluff, Arkansas. "Canning softens those bones, just as it does for salmon."

Fish farmers have already made a place for Chinese carp in their ponds—primarily as maintenance personnel.

Arkansas alone has more than 69,000 acres of

water devoted to aquaculture and leads the nation in production of bighead carp. While its cousin, the grass carp, polishes off pond-clogging aquatic weeds, the bighead carp feasts on plankton that flourish naturally in catfish ponds.

"That's the beauty of the bighead carp—you don't have to feed it,"

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ARS food technologist Donald Freeman inspects a Chinese bighead carp ready for harvest. (K7535-1)

explains Freeman. "Even when you put feed in the pond for other fish, the bighead carp prefers plankton, so it's not competing for that feed."

Americans have a growing taste for fish. Per-capita consumption climbed from 11.8 pounds in 1970 to more than 15 in 1995. To meet this demand, the United States imported more than 3 billion pounds of edible fish in 1991, compared with just 1.87 billion pounds in 1970.

Arkansas fish farmers were the first to envision a place for canned carp at the table. In 1992, a preliminary consumer acceptance study of canned carp was conducted under

the direction of Ted

McNulty, aquaculture coordinator for the state of Arkansas, and Carole Engle, coordinator of aquaculture projects at the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff. Taste-test participants praised the product's flavor.